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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [EN](#)

SUBJECT: ESTONIA'S NEW PRESIDENT PART I: ILVES ELECTION  
SHAKES UP POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

REF: A. TALLINN 00887

[1](#)B. TALLINN 00756

Classified By: by DCM Jeff Goldstein for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary. Toomas Henrik Ilves brings international perspective and strong foreign policy experience to the presidency in Estonia. In contrast to his predecessor, Ilves has made it clear that he will use the presidency as a bully pulpit on both domestic and foreign policy issues. While the presidential election represented the first shots in next spring's parliamentary election campaign, it is not yet clear what effect Ilves' election will have on the results of those elections. This cable reports Ilves' biography, his likely operating style, and some initial thoughts on how his election might affect the domestic political situation. A companion piece will consider Ilves' role in foreign policy. End Summary.

From Exile to Diplomat

[1](#)2. (U) Ilves was born in Stockholm, Sweden on December 26, 1953 to Estonian emigre, parents who had fled the Soviet occupation of Estonia in 1944. Ilves grew up in the United States and attended Leonia High School in New Jersey. He received a BA and MA in psychology from Columbia University (1976) and the University of Pennsylvania (1978). For much of his early career, Ilves was an academic: an English teacher at the Open Education Center (1979-1981) in New Jersey, Director of the Vancouver Arts Center (1981-1983, and Lecturer in Estonian literature and linguistics at Simon Fraser University (1983-1984) in Canada.

[1](#)3. (U) Ilves returned to Europe in 1984 to work for Radio Free Europe in Germany as an analyst and researcher (1984-1988), and eventually was promoted to Head of the Estonian Desk (1988-1993). During this time, Ilves was a prominent and active member of the Estonian exile community in Europe and North America.

[1](#)4. (C) In 1993, Ilves relinquished his U.S. nationality in order to become Estonia's Ambassador to the United States, Canada, and Mexico (1993-1996). He subsequently served twice as Foreign Minister (1996-1998 and 1999-2002). During his tenure, Ilves often pointed to Estonia's avoidance of the "double no" (exclusion from being one of the first round of candidates for EU and NATO membership) as his finest achievement at the MFA. Unlike Latvia and Lithuania, which focused their attention on NATO membership, Ilves went on a fifteen country barnstorming tour throughout Europe to gain support for EU membership. As he often told confidants, "The road to NATO runs through Brussels." Ultimately, Estonia was included in the EU's first round of membership negotiations while the other Balts were not.

¶5. (SBU) Ilves is considered by many within Estonia's MFA - often internally referred to as "the house that Meri built" - as one of their own. In contrast to Meri's tendency toward radical reformer and institutional architect, Ilves focused on strengthening continuity and stability within the MFA. In one of his last speeches as Foreign Minister, he highlighted his pride that Estonia's foreign policy had transitioned from "breakthroughs" to "sustained foreign policy irrespective of government changes."

#### A Political Animal in Estonia and Brussels

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¶6. (U) Ilves has been a major political figure in domestic politics since 1998. He moved from the Peasants Party (a conservative rural party) to the People's Party (a reformed Peasants Party) and later to the Moderates Party (which he led). In 2002 when the coalition government collapsed (Pro Patria, Reform, and Moderates), Ilves reconstituted and renamed the Moderates as the Estonian Social Democratic Party. During the last four years, Ilves has been the Social Democrats most visible and prominent member, although he gave up the post of party leader after his election to the European Parliament in 2004.

¶7. (C) In the 2004 European elections, it is generally recognized that the Social Democrats strong showing in Estonia was a direct result of Ilves personal popularity. From 2004 to 2006, Ilves was a Member of the European Parliament (MEP) where he served as Vice-President of the Foreign Affairs Committee. As an MEP, Ilves focused on EU-Russian relations, EU-U.S. relations, EU neighborhood policy (concerning Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, and the Balkans), energy security, and human rights. In one of his first speeches in the European Parliament in 2004,

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Ilves warned against the EU withdrawing into a "fortress Europe" and called on the EU to direct more resources toward its new neighbors. As a strong Atlanticist, Ilves privately expressed to us his dissatisfaction with growing anti-Americanism not only in Brussels but in Europe in general (septel).

#### The People's Choice

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¶8. (U) On October 9th, Ilves was sworn in as Estonia's fourth president (Ref A). While his margin of victory in the election was only one electoral vote, he has emerged with a clear popular mandate. Recent polls indicate Ilves has strong popular support across most sectors of society, with the exception of Estonia's Russian-speaking population:

- 81 percent of ethnic Estonians
- 33 percent of non-Estonians
- 74 percent of 18-34 year olds
- 62 percent of senior citizens
- 76 percent of higher-educated voters
- 54 percent from those with just elementary and/or high school diplomas
- 80 percent of people with an income over 6,000 EEK (\$481) per month
- 59 percent of people with an income between 2,000 - 4,000 EEK (\$160-\$321) per month
- 71 percent of women and 64 percent of men
- 65 percent of Tallinn residents
- 72 percent of small town and rural residents

Ilves' strong support in rural areas is notable, as this is the traditional base for both former President Arnold Ruutel and the People's Union. Even more surprising - one third of Ruutel supporters have indicated satisfaction with Ilves - victory.

¶9. (SBU) In accordance with the constitution, after the election, Ilves relinquished his affiliation with the Social Democratic Party. He also called for abandoning the notion of a "pro-presidential party." Ilves' election significantly weakened the basis of the recent political agreement between Center Party and the People's Union. As part of that deal, a reelected Ruutel was reportedly to have nominated Minister of Economy Edgar Savisaar as prime minister of a Center Party-People's Union government after the parliamentary elections next spring. (Ref B). However, Ilves' victory and the recent resignation of People's Party Leader Vilju Reiljan as Minister of Environment (due to a land scandal), has left many pundits wondering what direction the People's Union will take. Lea Kiivit, People's Union Secretary General, told us that the party is in a period of "serious reflection" over its future.

¶10. (C) At the same time, Ilves' election has energized the four parties that supported him (Res Publica, Pro Patria, Reform, and Social Democrats). Ott Lumi, Res Publica Secretary General, expressed to us his satisfaction with

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the four parties' cooperation in bringing about an Ilves win. Lumi said, "We have shown that we can work together successfully...and now we have a positive energy we can carry into the (parliamentary) elections!" Recent polls indicate that Center Party's popularity is slipping and Reform is now the most popular party (with the public and the donors) in Estonia.

¶11. (C) In spite of Ilves' weak support among Russian-speakers, his victory has made some politicians optimistic about the possibility of weakening the Center Party's traditional lock on the Russian-speaking vote. Randel Lants, Secretary General of the Social Democrats, told us his party believes Ilves' election has created an opportunity to "chip away at Center Party's hold on the Russian vote." Lants noted that many Social Democratic policy proposals (i.e., more funding for social programs) resonate with the Russian-speaking minority, and Parliamentary elections next spring could result in a possible realignment of the Russian vote. While this is unlikely in the short term, even a relatively small reduction in the Russian-speaking community's support for Center could have a decisive impact on the outcome of Parliamentary elections next spring.

A Bully Pulpit  
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¶12. (SBU) In Estonia's parliamentary system, the presidency

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holds limited powers. However, it is clear that Ilves plans to be more active than his predecessor. He has frequently cited President Lennart Meri (1999-2001) as an important role model in his professional life. Symbolically, after his victory in the electoral college, Ilves' first stop was Meri's grave. Ilves will likely emulate Meri's use of the presidency as a bully pulpit, although he has told us that, unlikely Meri, he will not push the constitutional limits of the president's authority. Vello Pettai, Tartu University professor of Estonian politics, told us that Ilves has always been vocal and opinionated - "now he will have the platform of the presidency to get his message across." Andres Kasekamp, Director of the Estonian Foreign Policy Institute and a fellow Estonian emigre, who has known Ilves since his days in the United States, described Ilves' style as "big picture." "Unlike Meri," Kasekamp told us, "Ilves will not have his fingers in every pot; Ilves will paint with broad strokes and leave the detail work to others."

## Personal Insights

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¶13. (C) According to those who know Ilves personally, he is a man who "does not like being handled." He is widely perceived to be arrogant and aloof, but also an independent thinker and intellectual. Even though his political opponents have routinely labeled him as a bohemian dilettante (which he does not seem to mind), they grudgingly accept him as one of Estonia's foreign policy heavyweights. Ilves routinely writes his own speeches and articles, which often make historical, philosophical, and literary allusions that betray his academic past and his wide range of interests. He is well read and regularly refers to the works of Enlightenment thinkers. In his inaugural speech he quoted John Locke and Jean-Jacque Rousseau. Ilves lacks a natural regional base in Estonia, because he grew up overseas. He has compensated for this in part through membership in various organizations, fraternities, and associations. He has also shown an eye for self-promotion (through his newspaper articles and television interviews ) and self-branding (he always wears bow ties).

¶14. (U) Ilves is married to Evelin Ilves with whom he has one daughter, Kadi Keiu. He has two children - Luukas Kristjan and Juulia Kristiine - from a previous marriage. His son Luukas is currently a student at Stanford University.  
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